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Putting Faith in Trends

Consultant Popcorn lives them, sells them—and makes them pay off big

Faith Popcorn looks through her living-room window toward her aerobic rowboat. ("The fitness trend," she explains.) To the left is the kitchen where the freezer holds a quart of Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ("fatness – a countertrend"). The rustic Long Island cottage is her weekend retreat ("the cocooning trend") and it's smaller than her last place ("the downsizing trend"). Like many refugees from New York, she is winding down after a hard week at the office ("the fatigue trend"). Even her line of work—trend analysis—qualifies for the list. "At the moment," she says earnestly, "there's a trend toward trends themselves."

Popcorn ought to know. Trends are not only her life—they're her livelihood. As founder of BrainReserve, a Manhattan-based marketing and trend-analysis firm, she is among a growing number of consultants devoted to divining the whims of American shoppers. For consumer-product companies scrambling to gain a competitive edge, Popcorn is a kind of walking, talking crystal ball; based on her slickly packaged predictions, giants like Campbell's Soup, Pillsbury and Eastman Kodak pay BrainReserve to formulate marketing plans, develop new products and reposition old ones. Fortune 500 companies aren't the only ones that put stock in her prognostications. So does the national press. In the past four years Popcorn has become one of the most interviewed women on the planet. The Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times and NEWSWEEK seem to consume her quotes like bags of Orville Redenbacher's finest.

You might say Popcorn *herself* is something of a piece of work. Fond of Paloma Picasso earrings, Italian clothing and up-to-the-minute coiffures (she may have been the only marketing consultant in America to sport a semipunk haircut), she personifies the trends she so often discusses.

JOHN ABBOTT

Profiting from power predictions: *The blue-chip guru in her New York City office*

Her forecasts command the same kind of attention. Popcorn, who talks of a 95 percent accuracy rate in her predictions, has called for a "fast-food lobster," a gourmet dog food and a Frank Perdue of fish. Her most noteworthy coup was a forecast, early on, that New Coke would be a mistake. ("The giant kneels," she said when the ill-fated soft drink was

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Faith in Trends (Cont.)

JOHN ABBOTT

Brains for hire: *Popcorn and her colleagues map the future*

being unveiled.) Earlier this year she prophesied about the popularity of home-media rooms, salt-free products, flashy cars and older TV stars. Among other forecasts: AIDS will turn into a major epidemic, motherhood will become an honored role for women, grains will be emphasized in cooking and water will become a scarce commodity.

To check the pulse of the buying public, Popcorn says she and her colleagues interview at least 2,000 consumers a year, keep abreast of movies and top-rated TV shows and read nearly 300 trade and consumer publications. They also keep a close eye on such powerful trend arbiters as Nancy Reagan and the Duchess of York.

One of Popcorn's predictions calls for a resurgence in the popularity of hard liquor. Among the clients on her list: Seagram's—one of the nation's largest liquor companies. Another refers to a return to home-cooked foods such as meat loaf and mashed potatoes. Popcorn's client: Campbell's, maker of Swanson's home-style dinners.

In explaining the business, Popcorn defers to her roster of happy clients. Eastman Kodak recently took her advice that a disposable camera would be well received by the public (the company is now introducing one). Similarly, Pillsbury has subscribed to her notion that the "cocooning" phenomenon will create new business opportunities in takeout foods. Says Pillsbury spokesman James R. Behnke: "I *believe* in cocooning." With so many true believers, Popcorn seems assured of a continued high profile. Still, she jokes that it may be time for an image makeover. "I think people should change their names once every 10 years." That, of course, might be "the name-change trend."

A Walking, Talking Crystal Ball

GOTTLIEB—NEWSWEEK

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Premium/Quality: Consumers will gladly pay more for premium brands, while sales of generics will dip.

Adventure: An appetite for new sensations will increase experimentation with a variety of exotic products.

Individuality/Style: Buyers will choose items that promote an image and express a personal sense of style.

Cocooning: More individuals will make purchases that provide control, comfort and security against what they perceive as a harsh outside world.

Indulgence: An "I deserve it" attitude — compensation for exercise and an antidote for stress — will lead to increased sales of luxury items.

Grazing/Variety: Sporadic dining—frequent snacking for energy—and the demand for easier meals are byproducts of working women, job demands and the need to manage one's time.

Return to Tradition: A nostalgic bent will put products and practices reminiscent of former times back in vogue.

Health, Natural: A focus on physical training and fresh and natural products stems from consumers' environmental concerns and desire for longevity.

Time Management: Quality products that promise to save the buyer time will be desired, with little regard for price.

Fight Back: As consumer concerns increase, complaints will rise.

WHEELER PICTURES

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